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Source: *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Jan. - Mar., 1950), pp. 1-15

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27537967>

Accessed: 13/06/2014 10:39

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THREE COMMENTARIES:  
POE, JAMES, AND JOYCE

BY ALLEN TATE

*I. The Fall of the House of Usher*

THIS famous story is perhaps not Poe's best, but it has significant features which ought to illuminate some of the later, more mature work in the naturalistic-symbolic technique of Flaubert, Joyce, and James. Poe's insistence upon unity of effect, from first word to last, in the famous review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*, anticipates from one point of view the high claims of James in his essay "The Art of Fiction." James asserts that the imaginative writer must take his art at least as seriously as the historian takes his; that is to say, he must no longer apologize, he must not say "it *may* have happened this way"; he must, since he cannot rely upon the reader's acceptance of known historical incident, create the illusion of reality, so that the reader may have a "direct impression" of it. It was toward this complete achievement of "direct impression" that Poe was moving, in his tales and in his criticism; he, like Hawthorne, was a great forerunner. The reasons why he did not himself fully achieve it (perhaps less even than Hawthorne) are perceptible in "The Fall of the House of Usher."

Like Hawthorne again, Poe seems to have been very little

influenced by the common-sense realism of the eighteenth-century English novel. What has been known in our time as the romantic sensibility reached him from two directions: the Gothic tale of Walpole and Monk Lewis, and the poetry of Coleridge. Roderick Usher is a "Gothic" character taken seriously; that is to say, Poe takes the Gothic setting, with all its machinery and *décor*, and the preposterous Gothic hero, and transforms them into the material of serious literary art. Usher becomes the prototype of the Joycean and Jamesian hero who cannot function in the ordinary world. He has two characteristic traits of this later fictional hero of our own time. First, he is afflicted with the split personality of the manic depressive:

His action was alternately vivacious and sullen. His voice varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision . . . and perfectly modulated guttural utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement.

Secondly, certain musical sounds (for some unmusical reason Poe selects the notes of the guitar) are alone tolerable to him: "He suffered from a morbid acuteness of the sense." He cannot live in the real world; he is constantly exacerbated. At the same time he "has a passionate devotion to the intricacies . . . of musical science"; and his paintings are "pure abstractions" which have "an intensity of intolerable awe."

Usher is, of course, both our old and our new friend; his new name is Monsieur Teste, and much of the history of modern French literature is in that name. Usher's "want of moral energy," along with a hypertrophy of sensibility and intellect in a split personality, places him in the ancestry of Gabriel Conroy, Stephen Daedalus, John Marcher, J. Alfred Prufrock, Mrs. Dalloway—a forebear of whose somewhat showy acces-

sories they might well be a little ashamed; or they might enjoy a degree of moral complacency in contemplating their own luck in having had greater literary artists than Poe present them to us in a more credible imaginative reality.

I have referred to the Gothic trappings and the poetry of Coleridge as the sources of Poe's romanticism. In trying to understand the kind of unity of effect that Poe demanded of the writer of fiction we must bear in mind two things. First, unity of *plot*, the emphasis upon which led him to the invention of the "tale of ratiocination"; but plot is not so necessary to the serious story of moral perversion of which "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Ligeia," and "Morella" are Poe's supreme examples. Secondly, the unity of tone, a quality that had not been consciously aimed at in fiction before Poe. It is this particular kind of unity, a poetical rather than a fictional characteristic, which Poe must have got from the Romantic poets, Coleridge especially, and from Coleridge's criticism as well as "Kubla Khan" and "Christabel." Unity of plot and tone can exist without the *created, active detail* which came into this tradition of fiction with Flaubert, to be perfected later by James, Chekhov, and Joyce.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," *there is not one instance of dramatized detail*. Although Poe's first-person narrator is in direct contact with the scene, he merely reports it; he does not show us scene and character in action; it is all description. The closest approach in the entire story to active detail is the glimpse, at the beginning, that the narrator gives us of the furtive doctor as he passes him on "one of the staircases." If we contrast the remoteness of Poe's reporting in the entire range of this story with the brilliant recreation of the character of Michael Furey by Gretta Conroy in "The Dead," we shall be able to form some conception of the advance in the techniques of reality that was achieved in the sixty-odd years between Poe and Joyce. The powerful description of the fa-

gade of the House of Usher, as the narrator approaches it, sets up unity of tone, but the description is never woven into the action of the story: the "metaphysical" identity of scene and character reaches our consciousness through *lyrical assertion*. The fissure in the wall of the house remains an inert symbol of Usher's split personality. At the climax of the story Poe uses an incredibly clumsy device in the effort to make the collapse of Usher active dramatically; that is, he employs the mechanical device of coincidence. The narrator is reading to Usher the absurd tale of the "Mad Trist" of Sir Lancelot Canning. The knight has slain the dragon and now approaches the "brazen shield," which falls with tremendous clatter. Usher has been "hearing" it, but what he has been actually hearing is the rending of the lid of his sister Madeline's coffin and the grating of the iron door of the tomb; until at the end the sister (who has been in a cataleptic trance) stands outside Usher's door. The door opens; she stands before them. The narrator flees and the House of Usher, collapsing, sinks forever with its master into the waters of the "tarn."

We could dwell upon the symbolism of the identity of house and master, of the burial alive of Madeline, of the fissure in the wall of the house and the fissure in the psyche of Usher. What we should emphasize here is the dominance of symbolism over its visible base: symbolism external and "lyrical," not intrinsic and dramatic. The active structure of the story is mechanical and thus negligible; but its lyrical structure is impressive. Poe's plots seem most successful when the reality of scene and character is of secondary importance in the total effect; that is, in the tale of "ratiocination." He seemed unable to combine incident with his gift for "insight symbolism"; as a result his symbolic tales are insecurely based upon scenic reality. But the insight was great. In Roderick Usher, as we have said, we get for the first time the hero of modern fiction. In the

history of literature the discoverer of the subject is almost never the perfecter of the techniques for making the subject real.

## *II. The Beast in the Jungle*

James's "The Beast in the Jungle" was first published in a "volume of miscellanies" entitled *The Better Sort* in 1903. It was written at about the same time as Joyce's "The Dead," and although the fables of the two stories differ as profoundly as their techniques, they invite comparison at several levels. Both stories hinge upon climaxes of self-revelation, and both limit the reader's access to the subject to a central intelligence; both end with a powerful irony which we may call "classical irony" because its appearance has been predicted by the reader, whose interest is thus engaged at a higher level than that of mere surprise. We know that John Marcher and Gabriel Conroy are failing in some fundamental insight into their predicaments: our suspense looks ahead to the revelation of this failure to themselves. It comes, in both stories, in a short-view scene, toward which our interest has been directed in mounting intensity.

Again, as in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Dead," we have the embodiment of the great contemporary subject: the isolation and the frustration of personality. It is a subject that goes back also to Poe's "William Wilson," and to Hawthorne in "The Bosom Serpent" and "Young Goodman Brown." Poe's method is nearer than Hawthorne's to the modern technique which grounds in psychological realism the symbolic representation of the hero's egoism. Hawthorne tends to scant the realistic base and to let his symbols become attenuated into allegory. But it is a fact of curious and perhaps of important historical interest that Hawthorne was the first American writer (he may have anticipated anybody in Europe) who was conscious of the failure of modern man to realize his full capacity for moral growth. In four entries in *American Notes*

he plays with this problem as the theme of a possible story, and he actually states the theme of "The Beast in the Jungle" some sixty years before the story was written:

A young man and a girl meet together, each in search of a person to be known by some peculiar sign. They watch and wait a great while for that person to pass. At last special circumstance discloses that each is the one that the other is waiting for. Moral—that what we need for our happiness is often close at hand, if we knew but how to seek it.

To distinguish certain features of the method of "The Beast in the Jungle" we could scarcely do better than to use some of James's own critical terms. The "story," reduced to the slight action through which James develops the values of the situation, can be told very briefly. At a party John Marcher meets May Bartram; they renew a casual acquaintance of ten years before. Miss Bartram reminds him of a remarkable confession that he had made on that occasion: he had seen himself as a man to whom something overwhelming was destined to happen, and his part in life, excluding all other aims, was to await it—something special, even unique, for which he was to hold himself in readiness. He still feels the imminence of his destiny: it may come at any moment. Marcher and Miss Bartram now enter into a long, uncommitted relationship from which she gets nothing and he all that he can allow himself to get, since he must accept nothing short of his supreme moment. What he gets in the long run is her life, but he cannot "use" it since he can give nothing in return. They drift, in this moral stalemate, into middle age. Miss Bartram dies. Marcher feels increasingly empty and abandoned, and forms the habit of haunting her grave (one thinks here of the related story, "The Altar of the Dead"), until one day he looks into the eyes of another man haunting another grave. The man's eyes expose the depths of

grief. The revelation forces Marcher into a tragic and ironic awareness. The supreme value for which he had reserved his life he had, of course, killed: it lay in the grave of May Bartram.

The story is laid out in six sections, and the point of view is consistently that of Marcher. The two first sections constitute a long foreground or "complication." It may be questioned whether the long complication is justified, since in it nothing "happens": in only about twice the space James lays the foreground of a very long novel, *The Ambassadors*. There are only two short-view scenes in the story. In slighting the scenic effect it is possible that James has violated one of his primary canons: the importance of rendition over statement. (There is too much of the elaborate voice of James, what Mr. Edmund Wilson has harshly described as the "Jamesian gas.") Yet one can see that he could not allow himself to get too deeply into Marcher's consciousness, at the stage of the complication, or Marcher himself would have had to examine his illusion too closely, and the story would have collapsed. The reader may well wonder whether the two brief scenic moments, when they finally come, are adequately prepared for, in spite of the length of preparation. James has not, in the first three sections, made either Marcher or Miss Bartram a *visible* character; he has merely presented their enveloping fate, as it *could* have been seen from Marcher's point of view; but we have seen them not quite credibly.

The excessive foreground is an instance of what James called the Indirect Approach to the objective situation through the trial-and-error of a Central Intelligence; but the Receptive Lucidity of a Strether, in *The Ambassadors*, is not at Marcher's command. Are we to conclude that the very nature of James's problem in "The Beast in the Jungle," the problem of dramatizing the insulated ego, of making active what in its essence is



incapable of action, excluded the use of an active and searching intelligence in the main character?

The first of the two scenes appears in part IV when years of waiting have driven May Bartram to something like desperation. She cannot overtly break the frame of their intercourse, which permits her only to affirm and reaffirm her loyalty to the rôle of asking nothing for herself; in the act of a new reaffirmation,

“No, no!” she repeated. “I’m with you—don’t you see—still.” And as to make it more vivid to him she rose from her chair—a movement she seldom risked in these days—and showed herself, all draped and all soft, in her fairness and slimness. “I haven’t forsaken you.”

We return to Strether’s mind, in which this reflection is all that the moment can give him:

. . . He couldn’t pity her for that; he could only take her as she showed—as capable even yet of helping him. It was as if, at the same time, her light might at any instant go out; wherefore he must make the most of it. . . . “Tell me if I shall consciously suffer.”

Here we get a special case of James’s Operative Irony, which “implies and projects the possible other case.” But the “possible other case” is not in the awareness of Marcher, as it always is in Strether; it is manipulated by James himself standing beside Marcher and moving May Bartram up close to imply her virtual offer of herself, her very body—an offer of which Marcher is not aware, so deeply concerned is he with his “problem.” As May Bartram stands before him, “all soft,” it is Marcher’s Beast which has leaped at him from his jungle; and he doesn’t know it.

It is a fine scene, unobtrusively arrived at, and it has a certain power. It is perhaps sounder in its structure than the second and climactic scene. Marcher’s frequent visits to Miss

Bartram's grave are occasions of a developing insight into his loss, his failure to see that his supreme experience had been there for him day after day through many years. But James must have known that, to make the insight dramatically credible, it must reach the reader through a scene; and to have a "scene" there must be at least two persons and an interchange between them. He thus suddenly introduces, at the last moment, what he called in the Prefaces a *ficelle*, a character not in the action but brought in to elicit some essential quality from the involved characters. The stranger haunting the other grave is such a *ficelle*; but not having been "planted" earlier and disguised, he appears with the force of a shock, and could better be described as a *deus ex machina*—a device for ending an action by means of a force outside it; here it serves to render scenically, for the eye and ear, what had otherwise been a reported insight of Marcher's. James could not let himself merely tell us that Marcher had at last seen his tragic flaw; he must contrive to show him seeing it.

If this story is the greatest of the James *nouvelles*, as it probably is, one must reconsider the generally held belief that it is his special form, in which he scored greater triumphs than he ever did in the novels. If we look at it in terms of the visible material—the material *made* visible—it is much too long; the foreground is too elaborate, and the structure suffers from the disproportion of the Misplaced Middle (James's phrase); that is, he has not been able to render dramatically parts I and II and "confer on the false quantity the brave appearance of the true." If the grief-stricken stranger at the end was to be more than a palpable trick, should not James have planted him (or his equivalent) somewhere in the foreground?

These questions do not exhaust the story, which remains one of the great stories in the language. In the long run its effect is that of tone, even of lyric meditation; and it is closer to the method of Hawthorne than one may at a glance suppose; for

in the last scene it is very nearly allegory, though less so than that companion piece, James's great failure in spite of its own great tone, "The Altar of the Dead." In neither of these stories is the naturalistic detail distinct enough to give the situation reality; and the symbolism tends to allegory because there is not enough detail to support it. We must always turn to Joyce's "The Dead" for the great modern example of the *nouvelle*.

### III. *The Dead*

In "The Dead" James Joyce brings to the highest pitch of perfection in English the naturalism of Flaubert; it may be questioned whether his great predecessor and master was able so completely to lift the objective detail of his material up to the symbolic level, as Joyce does in this great story. If the art of naturalism consists mainly in making *active* those elements which had hitherto in fiction remained *inert*, that is, description and expository summary, the further push given the method by Joyce consists in manipulating what at first sight seems to be mere physical detail into dramatic symbolism. As Gabriel Conroy, the "hero" of "The Dead," enters the house of his aunts, he flicks snow from his galoshes with his scarf; by the time the story ends the snow has filled all the visible earth, and stands as the symbol of the revelation of Gabriel's inner life.

Joyce's method is that of the roving narrator; that is to say, the author suppresses himself but does not allow the hero to tell his own story, for the reason that "psychic distance" is necessary to the end in view. This end is the *sudden* revelation to Gabriel of his egoistic relation to his wife and, through that revelation, of his inadequate response to his entire experience. Thus Joyce must establish his central intelligence through Gabriel's eyes, but a little above and outside him at the same

time, so that we shall know him at a given moment only through what he sees and feels in terms of that moment.

The story opens with the maid, Lily, who all day has been helping her mistresses, the Misses Morkan, Gabriel's aunts, prepare for their annual party. Here, as in the opening paragraph of Joyce's other masterpiece in *Dubliners*, "Araby," we open with a neutral or suspended point of view; just as Crane begins "The Open Boat" with: "None of them knew the color of the sky." Lily is "planted" because, when Gabriel arrives, he must enter the scene dramatically, and not merely be *reported* as entering; if his eye is to *see* the story, the eye must be established actively, and it is so established in the little incident with Lily. If he is to see the action for us, he must come authoritatively out of the scene, not throw himself at us. After he flicks the snow, he sounds his special note; it is a false note indicating his inadequate response to people and even his lack of respect for them. He refers patronizingly to Lily's personal life; when she cries out in protest, he makes it worse by offering her money. From that moment we know Gabriel Conroy, but we have not been *told* what he is: we have had him *rendered*.

In fact, from the beginning to the end of the story we are never told anything; we are shown everything. We are not told, for example, that the *milieu* of the story is the provincial, middle-class, "cultivated" society of Dublin at the turn of the century; we are not told that Gabriel represents its emotional sterility (as contrasted with the "peasant" richness of his wife Gretta), its complacency, its devotion to genteel culture, its sentimental evasion of "reality." All this we see dramatized; it is all made active. Nothing is given us from the externally omniscient point of view. At the moment Gabriel enters the house the eye shifts from Lily to Gabriel. It is necessary, of course, at this first appearance that *we* should see him: there is a brief description; but it is not Joyce's description: we see him

as Lily sees him—or might see him if she had Joyce's superior command of the whole situation. This, in fact, is the method of "The Dead." From this point on we are never far from Gabriel's physical sight; we are constantly looking through his physical eyes at values and insights of which he is incapable. The significance of the *milieu*, the complacency of Gabriel's feeling for his wife, her romantic image of her lover Michael Furey, what Miss Ivors means in that particular society, would have been put before us, in the pre-James era in English fiction, as exposition and commentary through the direct intercession of the author; and it would have remained inert.

Take Miss Ivors: she is a flat character, she disappears the moment Joyce is through with her, when she has served his purpose. She is there to elicit from Gabriel a certain quality, his relation to his culture at the intellectual and social level; but she is not in herself a *necessary* character. It is to this sort of character, whose mechanical use must be given the look of reality, that James applied the term *ficelle*. She makes it possible for Joyce to charge with imaginative activity an important phase of Gabriel's life which he would otherwise have been compelled to give us as mere information. Note also that this particular *ficelle* is a woman: she stands for the rich and complex life of the Irish people out of which Gabriel's wife has come, and we are thus given a subtle dramatic presentation of a spiritual limitation which focuses symbolically, at the end of the story, upon his relation to his wife.

The examples of naturalistic detail which operate also at the symbolic level will sufficiently indicate to the reader the close texture of "The Dead." We should say, conversely, that the symbolism itself derives its validity from its being, in the first place, a visible and experienced moment in the consciousness of a character.

Take the incident when Gabriel looks into the mirror. It serves two purposes. First, we need to *see* Gabriel again and

more closely than we saw him when he entered the house; we know him better morally and we must see him more clearly physically. At the same time, he looks into the mirror because he is not, and has never been, concerned with an objective situation; he is wrapped in himself. The mirror is an old and worn symbol of Narcissism, but here it is effective because its first impact is through the action; it is not laid on the action from the outside.

As the party breaks up, we see Gabriel downstairs; upstairs Mr. Bartell D'Arcy is singing (hoarsely and against his will) "The Lass of Aughrim." Gabriel looks up the stairs:

A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow also. He could not see her face but he could see the terra-cotta and salmon-pink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white. It was his wife. Gabriel was surprised at her stillness. . . .

She is listening to the song. As she stands, one hand on the banister, listening, Gabriel has an access of romantic feeling. "*Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a painter." At this moment Gabriel's whole situation in life begins to be reversed, and because he will not until the end be aware of the significance of the reversal, its impact upon the reader from here on is an irony of increasing power. As he feels drawn to his wife, he sees her romantically, with unconscious irony, as "*Distant Music*," little suspecting how distant she is. He sees only the "lower" part of her figure; the "upper" is involved with the song, the meaning of which, for her, we do not yet know. The concealment of the "upper" and the visibility, to Gabriel, of the "lower," constitute a symbol, dramatically and naturalistically *active*, of Gabriel's relation to his wife: he has never acknowledged her spirit, her identity as a person; he knows only her body. And at the end, when he tries to possess her physically, she reveals with crushing force her full being,

her own separate life, in the story of Michael Furey, whose image has been brought back to her by the singing of Mr. Bartell D'Arcy.

The image of Michael provides our third example. The incident is one of great technical difficulty, for no preparation, in its own terms, was possible. How, we might ask ourselves, was Joyce to convey to us (and to Gabriel) the reality of Gretta's boy lover? Could he let Gretta say that a boy named Michael Furey was in love with her, that he died young, that she had never forgotten him because, it seemed to her, he must have died for love of her? This would be mere statement, mere reporting. Let us see how Joyce does it.

"Some one you were in love with?" he asked ironically.

"It was a young boy I used to know," she answered, "named Michael Furey. He used to sing that song, *The Lass of Aughrim*. He was very delicate."

Having established in the immediate dramatic context, in relation to Gabriel, her emotion for Michael, who had created for her a complete and inviolable moment, she is able to proceed to details which are living details because they have been acted upon by her memory: his big, dark eyes; his job at the gas-works; his death at seventeen. But these are not enough to create space around him, not enough to present his image.

". . . I heard gravel thrown up against the window. The window was so wet I couldn't see so I ran downstairs as I was and slipped out the back into the garden and there was the poor fellow at the end of the garden, shivering."

Up to this passage, we have been *told* about Michael; we now begin to *see* him. And we see him in the following passage:

"I implored him to go home at once and told him he would get his death in the rain. But he said he did not want to live. I can see his eyes as well as well! He was standing at the end of the wall where was a tree."

Without the wall and the tree to give him space he would not exist; these details cut him loose from Gretta's story and present him in the round.

The overall symbol, the snow, which we first see as a scenic detail on the toe of Gabriel's galoshes, gradually expands until at the end it gathers up the entire action. The snow is the story. It is not necessary to separate its development from the dramatic structure or to point out in detail how at every moment, including the splendid climax, it reaches us through the eye as a naturalistic feature of the background. Its symbolic operation is of greater importance. At the beginning, the snow is the cold and even hostile force of nature, humanly indifferent, enclosing the warm conviviality of the Misses Morcan's party. But just as the human action in which Gabriel is involved develops in the pattern of the plot of *Reversal*, his situation at the end being the opposite of its beginning, so the snow reverses its meaning, in a kind of rhetorical dialectic: from naturalistic *coldness* it develops into a symbol of warmth, of expanded consciousness; it stands for Gabriel's escape from his own ego into the larger world of humanity, including "all the living and the dead."